

Validation

by Ashfae

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Summary: Akane gets fed up with her life and leaves Nerima...followed (of course) by Ranma.

## 1. Chapter

### One

\*\*\*\*\*

"RANMA, YOU JERK!!!!!"

\*smash\*

"RANMA, YOU JERK!!!!!"

\*smash\* \*smash\*

\*\*"RANMA, YOU \_JERK!!!!!"\*\*

\*SMASHSMASHSMASHSMASHSMASHSMASH\*

Akane sat down amidst the dust of nine pulverized bricks, her eyes unhappy and her hands still clenched into fists.

And so, another day in the Tendo household began...

\*\*\*\*\*

\_Validation\_

><div class="center">A Ranma 12 Fanfic by Ashfae

><div class="center">Chapter One<div>

\*\*\*\*\*

\_I hate my life.\_

"Yo, Akane, hurry up, we're gonna be late!"

Akane picked up the pace, running around corners until she finally got to her high school. Without thinking about it she punched Kunou in passing, ran into the building, into her classroom, and slid into her seat just in time to be late.

As usual, she found herself standing out in the hallway with Ranma, holding buckets of water. The normal punishment wasn't really a punishment for her; she was strong enough so that the bucket wasn't even remotely heavy.

As usual, Ranma made the occasional snide comment. But unlike most days, Akane only made the occasional sarcastic reply. She wasn't up to fighting. Eventually Ranma stopped talking and found something in the floor to occupy his attention.

\_I really, really hate my life.\_

Akane sighed. She looked down into the bucket she was holding, staring at her reflection in the water. Her face was wavy and dark, mysterious, unfamiliar...

\_Look at you. What do you think you're doing? Who are you, anyway?\_

She frowned. \_My name is Akane Tendou. Okay. That's a start. I'm the youngest of three daughters. My father is Soun Tendou. My mother... is dead. I'm a martial artist, a good student, and...well, a terrible cook. Because of my dad, I'm engaged to Ranma Saotome.\_ She looked at him askance. \_Huh. Wonderful. What else?\_

She thought about it for a while, but couldn't think about anything else.

"Yo, Akane, what's up?"

"Hmmm?" she looked up to see Ranma looking at her strangely.

"I said what's up? You're not yourself today."

She opened her mouth to answer, then realized she didn't have an answer. "Nothing." She looked back down.

"But..."

There was a loud crash. Akane jumped, startled, and looked up to see one of the classic scenes at Furinkan High: Tatewaki Kunou, wearing his traditional samurai garb and an expression of righteous fury, had just tried (and failed) to brain Ranma with his bokken. Ranma looked bored.

Kunou glared at Ranma with infinite malice, then straightened up and attempted to look solemn and dignified. "Ranma Saotome...'my blood hath been too cold and temperate, unapt to stir at these

indignities...an you have found me, for accordingly you tread upon my patience; but be sure, I will from henceforth rather be myself, mighty and to be fear'd, than my condition, which hath been smooth as oil, soft as young down, and therefore lost that title of respect which the proud soul ne'er pays but to the proud.'"

Ranma groaned and held his head in his hands. "Man, are you ever gonna learn to speak English?"

Kunou's eyes narrowed. "Vile sorceror! You will refer to me as Upperclassman!"

"Yeah, whatever, lemme guess, you're here to attack me so that you can free Akane Tendou and the Pig-Tailed Girl, right?"

"Indeed. You have usurped their affections long enough! It is time to put your evil reign to an end, and free the spirits of my lovelies!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah...let's get it over with." Ranma took up an obvious attack position with easy familiarity.

"Wait just a minute." Akane pushed Ranma aside and looked Kunou straight in the eyes. "Kunou, I am not interested. Please, will you just leave me alone?"

"Ah, the fierce Akane Tendou...thy beauty doth make me like thee well. Fear not, my dearest, for soon I will have freed you from this curse. Then you will be free to bestow all of your love upon the one who truly deserves it!"

Akane glared at him. "Look, Kunou..."

Ranma proceeded to kick Kunou squarely in the chest and then knock him unconscious before she could get any further. "Feh. What a moron."

Akane clenched her fists. "Ranma, why don't you ever just let me handle it? I could've gotten rid of him without your help."

He looked at her as though she were crazy. "You know he's never gonna listen. Why bother?"

Her temper flared. "That's not the point! I meant...oh, nevermind..." I'm really not up to fighting with Ranma any more today. I'm not up to fighting with anyone. I just don't care.

She leaned back against the wall. I wish this day would end.

Ranma looked at her, but said nothing.

\*\*\*\*\*

Why do I go through this every day?

She was walking home from school, halfheartedly carrying her bookbag slung over one shoulder. Ranma was walking a few steps behind her, but she was only marginally aware of him.

She frowned. Then again, what could I do? We've all gotten into a

routine...Ranma and I are together- heck, we **\*\*live\*\*** together- and then he gets attacked, or we're fighting, or one of his fiancées shows up...\_

"Nihao Ranma!"

Akane sighed. \_Right on schedule.\_

The purple-haired Amazon bounced out of nowhere and glomped onto Ranma. "Shampoo have two tickets to movie this afternoon! Airen want come?"

Akane turned and looked around. Shampoo was squeezing Ranma so tightly that he was almost choking. In fact..."Shampoo, I don't think he can breathe."

Shampoo glared at Akane. "Violent pervert girl go away. Shampoo talking to husband now."

"You're also making him suffocate."

Shampoo noticed around then that Ranma's face was purple and let go. "Aiyah!" Ranma collapsed to one knee, fighting to get his breath back. "Ranma, you all right?"

"Uh...yeah, Shampoo...didja have to squeeze me that hard??" Ranma looked annoyed.

Shampoo shrugged. "Shampoo just so happy to see you, not able to help it. You take Shampoo on date tonight, yes?"

"Why don't you ever realize that he's not interested?"

Shampoo whirled around to glare at Akane. "What violent tomboys know? You just jealous." A wicked gleam came into her eyes. "Want fight? Shampoo happy give you one."

Akane's eyes narrowed and she let her bookbag fall to the ground, preparing herself. "Anytime."

Ranma scrambled up off of the ground. "Hey! C'mon Akane, you know you're not good enough to take on Shampoo."

"Ranma, shut up and stay out of it."

"No." He picked her up and leapt onto a nearby rooftop, then started running towards home, bouncing across the rooftops. Shampoo's frustrated screams echoed from behind them.

Akane's hands clenched themselves into fists again, but she couldn't catch her breath to yell at Ranma.

Not until they got home.

"You idiot!" she screamed when he set her down. "Why are you always interfering? Why can't you just leave me alone, you stupid jerk?"

Ranma looked peeved. "'Cause if you'd tried to fight her, you woulda gotten creamed! I was just tryin' to protect you! Geez!"

"I don't \_need\_ you to protect me! I can protect \_myself\_ just fine!"

"Oh yeah?" Faster than she would ever have expected, his leg swept around and under her, slamming into her legs so that she fell hard onto the ground. He smirked. "Stupid tomboy."

Akane felt something within her snap. First Kunou, then Shampoo, and now this...she was overwhelmed by fury and frustration. She was tempted to give in to habit and release it by bashing Ranma, or bashing bricks, or bashing \_something\_...

Instead she took a deep breath, and let all the anger sink deep inside of her, taking all her other emotions with it.

Calmly, Akane stood up, turned around, and into the house. She was dimly aware of Ranma staring after her and saying her name, but ignored him.

\_This is going to  
stop.\_

\*\*\*\*\*

Ranma was confused. Usually after he insulted her, Akane would just hit him and yell at him. He could deal with that; he was used to it, and besides he was still trying to figure out exactly how she pulled that mallet trick...

This, he didn't understand. She hadn't said anything, hadn't even looked hurt; she'd just walked upstairs and closed the door. He hadn't seen her since.

He'd been doing katas in the dojo for an hour trying to pretend that he wasn't worried, but it wasn't working so he gave up and sat cross-legged on the floor, thinking.

\_She can't be hurt. I mean, I insult her all the time. It's almost a game...I insult her, she bashes me. Happens every day. Why's it different this time?\_

He sighed. \_Guess I should...apologize...or somethin'...\_

Reluctantly, Ranma stood up and made his way to Akane's room. It took him ten minutes to manage to knock on the door.

"Yeah?"

"Um. It's me." Ranma opened the door and walked in. The room was dark; he could barely make out Akane's silhouette. She was sitting at her desk, her chin resting on her hands, looking at the night sky.

"Umm...Akane?"

Her voice was perfectly calm. "Go away, Ranma."

\_That hurt. Why did that hurt?\_ "I...but...I just wanted to say that I'm...well...sorry."

She turned to look at him; he wished he could see her face. "So am I." There still wasn't any emotion on her voice. She turned away again. "But please leave me alone."

Ranma stood there, flustered, for a few more seconds before backing out and closing the door. He stared down at the doorknob for a few minutes before walking back down the hallway.

\*\*\*\*\*

He awoke the next morning to the sound of screams.

"AKANE!!!!!!!!!! My little girl!!!!!!!!!" Soun Tendou, as usual, was crying.

\_Great. I don't even wanna know what's up this time...\_ Still, Ranma felt...uneasy. He shook his head and forced himself to get up. \_Probably she just tried to break the engagement again, or cooked, or somethin'...\_

Before he even had a chance to think anymore, he found himself grabbed by the arm and hauled downstairs by a giant panda. "Pops?!" Ranma shouted. "Whaddaya think you're doing, old man?"

The panda scowled (somehow) at Ranma and pulled out one of his signs, seemingly from nowhere. \*What did you do to Akane????\*

He just stared. "Huh?"

"Akane's gone, Ranma." He whirled around to see Nabiki glaring at him. "She's disappeared. We can't find her anywhere. She didn't sleep in her bed last night, and she hasn't been seen this morning. Plus, her backpack and some clothes are missing, and some food was taken from the pantry."

Ranma felt something in him stop. \_She couldn't have...\_

He remembered how different she'd been acting yesterday, the feeling he'd gotten that something was really wrong, this time. \_She might've.\_ "Oh no..." he whispered without thinking.

"Ranma!" He barely heard Soun Tendou yelling at him. "As Akane's fiancée, it is your \_duty\_ to find her and bring her back!"

His father the panda nodded rapidly and held up another sign. \*I know we can count on you, boy! Bring honor to our family name by rescuing Akane!\*

The long and short of it was that without really realizing how it happened, Ranma found himself alone in the street with his camping equipment, preparing to set off to find his fiancée.

\_Here we go again...\_ he thought disgustedly, remembering the time she'd run off to Ryukenzawa. \_I'm always chasing after that crazy tomboy for one reason or another.\_

He wandered down the street without really paying attention to where he was going, scowling and insulting Akane under his breath.

And desperately trying not to admit that he was worried.

\*\*\*\*\*

Akane looked up. She'd wandered off the main road hours ago, after taking a train as far away from Nerima as possible- she'd barely noticed what stop she'd gotten off at. And now she was trailbreaking through the woods in one of the more hilly sections of Japan. She was intending to head up into the mountains...but not for several more days, at least. She wanted to get used to all this.

\_It's all so...quiet...I'd forgotten what quiet was like. It's never quiet back at home, not with fiancées and martial artists and Ranma and his dad sparring...\_

\_I won't think about him. I promised myself.\_

The sun was setting, and the air was growing a bit colder. Akane shrugged off her backpack and took some time to sort through her belongings, setting up a small tent. \_Too bad I can't build a fire here, not without cleaning all the leaves and things off of the ground first, and I just don't have the energy for that. Oh well; I don't really need a fire tonight anyway, and I definitely don't want to let people know I'm here. Not so soon after leaving home.\_

Akane sighed. For the first time since she'd come up with this wild idea, late last night, she let herself think about all the consequences. \_Kasumi's gotta be worried sick, and Nabiki, and Daddy's probably throwing a fit. Maybe this isn't such a great idea, but what else can I do? I had to get away from Nerima and everyone in it for a while. I've lived there my whole life, but I hate it there now. All the chaos and confusion and misunderstandings...it's too much. Maybe I can get things figured out, here. If nothing else it'll be nice to work on my martial arts for a while. I hated being compared to everyone else so much that I've almost stopped working on them completely lately.\_

\_I won't give up. I **\*\*never\*\*** give up, not on anything. I will do this.\_

\_I know I can do this.\_

Physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted, Akane fell asleep.

\*\*\*\*\*

She awoke early the next morning disoriented and confused; it took a few minutes to remember everything. Ignoring any doubts or regrets, Akane crawled outside of her tent and looked outside.

It was a lovely morning, misty and vibrant. \_Wow. I'd forgotten how nice it is to sleep outside. I'd forgotten how nice quiet was.\_

Smiling now, she stretched her limbs.

Then she began running through her basic warmup exercises, some of the more intermediate katas. The physical effort cleared her mind. She was sweating by the time she finished, but happy.

Smiling contentedly, Akane packed her gear and set out again.

\_Ugh. I do wish I could take a bath, though. There's a stream around here someplace, though, and that'll do.\_

\_Why was I so worried? It's not like I haven't done this sort of thing before. Dad and I used to go on training missions all the time. I went by myself once or twice, and even with Ranma and his father once. And I survived on my own when I ran off to Ryukenzawa. It's not that hard to live in the wild. I brought supplies with me, and there's plenty of places around for fishing. I have all the time I need to think things out, and I even know a few places where I can go for training. And I'm already good enough to protect myself from nearly anyone who'd try to attack me. There aren't many wild animals out here, not that I couldn't handle any that would bother me. This is good. I can do this.\_

\_I'll improve my martial arts and get away from the insanity in Nerima for a while and sort everything out. Then I can go home.\_

Akane smiled to herself, and picked up the pace.

\*\*\*\*\*

It had been over a week, and Ranma had only just found signs that Akane had been around. He sighed, half in relief (though he wouldn't have admitted it, even to himself), and half in exasperation.

They were scarce...she was taking care not to leave tracks. Still, Ranma knew what to look for...after years of living in the wild with his father, it wasn't difficult. And he knew Akane's style.

He sat down, and idly tossed a rock from one hand to the other.

\_Why's she doin' this? As if life wasn't complicated enough already... well, it \_has\_ settled down into a sorta routine, I 'spose. Shampoo wants me, Ukyou loves me, Kodachi scares me, and Akane beats me up...Ryouga's still out for my blood, Mousse is still blind as a bat, Kunou's dumb as ever...everyone wants me to either get married or not get married to everyone else, and there's constant warfare... predictable warfare, though.\_

\_I wonder if Akane's as tired of it as I am?\_

He sighed. \_Akane...I think I...I mean, I can't see myself with anyone else, but...is that enough? And I'm \_definitely\_ not getting married yet! \_

\_ But...would it really be so bad?\_

His eyes narrowed, and he started squeezing the rock in his right hand. \_I am \*\*so\*\* sick of being confused!\_

The rock was crushed into powder. Ranma looked at his now-dusty hand in surprise, then shook the dust off. He lay down, resting his head on his arms. \_It's kinda nice out here...quiet...like when Dad and I were traveling. Sometimes I miss that. \_



\_ It's good to have a home, though...even if it is crazy. It's nice to have a place to go back to. \_

\_ It wouldn't mean much without Akane, though.\_

That thought surprised him, and his brow furrowed. \_Huh? Where'd that come from? I mean it's not like I \_like\_ that crazy tomboy... \_

\_ ...much...\_

He got to his feet, pondered the clearing he was in, and located Akane's trail again. He was only a day or so behind her.

\_If I don't sleep, maybe I can catch her tomorrow...\_

With that thought in mind, he started running.

\*\*\*\*\*

Akane woke up early that morning, yawned, and stretched contentedly. \_Such a beautiful morning...I could really get to like this life. No wonder Mr. Saotome took Ranma on a training trip and never went back...this is a good way to live. Nothing but nature, and the Art.\_

Humming quietly under her breath, she got dressed, exited her tent, and smiled at the clear sky. After taking a deep breath, she began to stretch, then fluidly moved into one of the simpler katas he father had taught her, years and years ago. \_Haven't been able to get this much practice since all those dumb boys attacked me every morning at school...sometimes I miss that, if only for the challenge.\_

Lost as she was in her exercise, Akane nonetheless heard the footsteps approaching her, and her head snapped up. Her eyes widened.

"Ranma," she said quietly, somehow not that surprised. She ignored the little thrill that went through her at seeing him.

"Um. Hi." He looked almost sheepish. Last time she'd run away and he'd been sent after her, he'd been furious. This time he looked sorta bewildered. She wondered why.

"They sent you to bring me home, didn't they."

"Well, yeah." He walked over to stand in front of her. "Didja really think they wouldn't?"

"I'm not going back with you, Ranma. And if you try to drag me back, I'll just run away again. You know I will." She locked her jaw, determined.

Ranma groaned. "Geez, Akane...why? What's this all about?"

She looked at him steadily. \_Hell, why not?\_ she decided spontaneously. \_Maybe for once, he'll listen.\_

\_Maybe he'd understand.\_ The wistful thought crept in despite herself.

"Sit down for a minute," she said quietly. Ranma frowned at her, but did as she asked, looking bored. She fought back her frustration with him; surprisingly, it wasn't as hard as usual. The past week had been good for her.

Akane sat down, too, and stared at the ground. "Ranma...when you think of the future...what do you see?"

Ranma looked startled and eyed her warily. She waited, not looking at him. He eased up after a few minutes, and appeared to think about the question. "Well...I see myself, working with the Art...I want to teach, most of all." He looked at her and seemed about to say something more, but was silent.

Akane sighed. "Yeah. Me too. I mean, I see myself getting married sometime, and I want children eventually, but...all I'm really certain of is that I'll still want to be doing martial arts."

He snorted. "You're kidding."

"Martial arts is my life, too, Ranma," Akane said quietly. "When Mother died..." She took a quick breath and paused, trying to hold back the tears. It was still so hard to say, even after over ten years... "When Mother died, Kasumi took her place. She was head of the household. She took care of all of us; we all depended on her. We still do. Nabiki wanted to help, and took over finances...she's not as mercenary as she seems, you know. A lot of it is just worry about us. We need her money-making schemes, and she never really hurts anyone...not even you. You and Kunou are her main targets...and he can afford it, and...well, it's harder, with you and your father around. It was difficult enough before, with Dad not working."

She saw Ranma wince out of the corner of her eyes, but he didn't interrupt, so she continued. "I wanted to help, too. But there wasn't anything I could do. So...while Kasumi and Nabiki took care of here and now, I decided that I'd look towards the future...that I'd be the one to inherit the dojo, and carry on the school. I made Dad teach me martial arts. He didn't want to at first 'cause I was a girl, but I wouldn't let go, and eventually he was proud of me, proud to teach me. And I was good!" she cried suddenly. "I was good at it! It became more than a duty, pretty soon. It was something I loved. It was part of me. I had my place in the family. I was helping, too."

"Then you came." She moved the dirt with her toes, staring at it morosely. "I knew I'd be the one who ended up as your fiancée as soon as Dad told us; I'd set myself up for it, because I'd promised myself and everyone else that I'd inherit the dojo, and carry on the family name. I didn't like the idea of getting forced into marriage- I still don't- but I wasn't surprised when I was picked."

"But you're much, much better at me at martial arts. I can't even compare. And it's you that's the real heir to the school, the one who's going to carry on. Not me. I don't have a place anymore. I'm just... the fiancée of the person who's going to inherit it all. Nothing else. Dad won't even teach me anymore; he keeps saying that you'll take care of that, that I don't need to study. I'm no longer the heir. I keep trying to find other places for myself, but there isn't anything. I can't even really call myself your fiancée, not

when we fight all the time, and never talk about anything, and you've always got someone or another chasing after you..." She sighed. "But then, so do I. Still, when you came... I lost everything, a piece at a time. I kept wanting to hate you for it, but I can't. But I don't have a place anymore. I don't know who I am anymore.

"It's worth anything to get that back. Can't you see? Even if I never beat you, it's worth everything to become good enough to beat everyone else. It's worth everything to have a place in my family, aside from just being your fiancée." She looked at her hands, slowly clenched them into fists. "Whether we get married or not, I need this. I've got to prove myself. I've got to!"

She looked up at him. "Do you understand, now, why I won't go back with you?"

Ranma was staring at her strangely, as though he'd just realized something he didn't want to believe, quite. But he also looked sympathetic. "Yeah," he said after a while. "I...never thought about it like that. I never saw that before." He eyed her thoughtfully.

"I never told anyone that before," she admitted. "Kasumi knows, sort of... we had a talk about it after the time Ryouga accidentally cut my hair." She smiled slightly. "After I realized the dojo wasn't going to be mine anymore, I fell back on growing my hair longer than Kasumi's. It was silly, but at least it was something. That's why it hurt so much when it was cut."

There was a long pause. Then, tentatively- "Your hair really is cute the way it is, though."

Her eyes went wide with astonishment. "Really?"

He wasn't looking at her, but he nodded quickly.

Akane felt tears form in her eyes. \_He's not usually nice to me. Maybe...maybe I should've tried talking to him long ago...\_

"Hey, um, Akane?"

She wiped the tears away before he could notice them. "Yeah?"

"Um...I have an idea..." He twiddled his fingers. "I know you won't come back with me yet, and...I don't blame you...so...what if...what if I...came...with...you?"

\_Say\_ what\_!?!?!?\_

When she didn't protest, he continued. "I mean, I can't really go home without you, our parents would kill me. And I can always use more training. We could spar, n'stuff. I could help you train. You know I could."

Akane was quiet for a long while.

When she spoke, it was very, very quietly. "Do you think we could try to be friends again? I mean...back when you first came...we fought, some, mostly because it was all so new and weird...it was so strange

to know someone who could change into a girl, and you'd never really lived anywhere before, but...we were friends. We didn't always fight. We'd go out for food and ice cream, and we'd talk about stuff, and you helped me get over Dr. Tofu, and...I miss all that. All the fiancees showed up, and everything changed and got complicated, and now all we do is fight, and it's not really for any reason at all. If it's just you and me...can we go back to being friends?"

It was Ranma's turn to be quiet for a while; she still couldn't look at him.

Finally..."I'd like that."

"Really?" Akane looked up.

Ranma smiled at her. "Yeah...I remember when I first got to Nerima, and I was a girl and Pop was a panda, and Nabiki was being so rude, and it was just awful...I didn't know what to do. I mean, I was a guy, but you all would've thought I was nuts if I tried to tell you. You've no idea how relieved I was when you asked if I'd like to be friends."

Akane smiled back; she'd forgotten that. "Yeah...too bad it didn't last long." She sighed. "Hey, Ranma, I never said...I'm...sorry...that I treated you so badly after finding out you were a boy. I felt like you'd tricked me, or humiliated me somehow, and I was so paranoid about getting beaten by guys thanks to all those idiots at school...you wanted to be friends, and I blew it, and in all this time I never managed to apologize."

Ranma raised an eyebrow. "You been thinkin' a lot, haven't you?" He grinned. "We're neither of us too good about sayin' we're sorry. And... I haven't been the easiest guy to live with either. How 'bout we call it even and try again?"

"Yeah." Akane felt happier than she had in ages, even happier than she'd been on her own, that past week. "Okay. That settled, you can come with me. As long as you train me, really train me, not just jumping out of the way whenever I try to hit you. And we try to be friends again. And...we don't mention fiancees, or anything like that, and we try not to insult each other. Deal?"

"Deal." Ranma hopped up to his feet. "So what's the plan?"

Akane's grin grew wider. "I think you were about to cook me breakfast."

"Excuse me?"

She looked at him innocently. "Would you rather I cooked for you?"

With remarkable rapidity, Ranma began rifling through his own gear for cooking supplies. Akane started laughing and went to take down her tent.

I wanted to avoid him...but I think this'll be better.

She hummed under her breath. Yappa pa, yappa pa, in shan ten...

\* \* \*

> <p> Notes: Kunou's speech is taken from <em>Henry IV: Part I<em>, the cursory remark to Akane is <em>The Taming of the Shrew<em>. Yup, I looked up real Shakespearean quotes. I love his work, and I'm fond of Kunou. Wheee! \_\_

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## 2. Chapter Two

"Again!"

\*splash\*

"Again!"

\*splash\*

"AGAIN!"

\*splash\*

"Akane, calm down! You're never going to learn at this rate."

"You can do it! If you can do it, I know I can learn! Let me at those fish!"

"Akane, you're trying to cook, not spar..."

\*\*\*\*\*

\_Validation\_

><div class="center">A Ranma 12 Fanfic by Ashfae

><div class="center">Chapter Two<div>

\*\*\*\*\*

Akane Tendou looked down at herself in disgust. Her clothes were soaked through with water, and sprinkles of random cooking ingredients. Absently she licked her lips, then winced. I didn't even know we had vinegar with us...

In fact, the entire campsite was a mess. With a sigh, Akane began cleaning. It was a good thing Ranma had given up and gone to fetch some water from the river; she wouldn't have wanted him to see this.

They'd been traveling together for almost two weeks. It wasn't that bad. Almost...nice. They talked a lot: Ranma told lots of stories

about when he and his Dad had traveled through the world, and Akane talked about her life before they'd showed up. The fights were kept down to a minimum. Ranma was trying really hard, she had to give him that much. He didn't insult her too often, and she wasn't as defensive. They were almost acting like a team.

Almost.

They'd done a whole lot of sparring, and she thought that maybe she was regaining the edge she'd had back when she'd been fighting all the boys in her school every morning. True, she was only working with one opponent, but Ranma was so quick that he sometimes seemed to be everywhere at once, all on his own. For once she was glad. He hadn't been insulting her martial arts either. He was critical, but he also helped show her what she was doing wrong. It was a nice change.

The cooking lessons weren't going too well, though.

Akane smiled to herself; that was an understatement. Most of the little fights they'd had were over her cooking. She wasn't an idiot- she knew how bad her cooking was. She just wished people would give her a chance.

Though after the week she'd spent living off of nothing but her own cooking, she couldn't really blame them for not wanting to.

Ranma had agreed to try and help teach her the basics of cooking, on the condition that she try anything she made before offering it to him. She was beginning to regret agreeing to that, though- not just the tasting, but the lessons in general. He was much better at teaching her martial arts.

Akane glared at the pile of various ruined foods she'd collected, and threw it onto the fire. A horrible, acidic, smoky smell emerged. She started choking, and backed away quickly, the smoke drawing tears to her eyes.

Damn. I'm never going to get the hang of this. What am I doing wrong?

"Geez, Akane, what's that smell?"

She looked up to see Ranma on the other side of the campfire, holding a string of fish and looking warily at the fire.

She sighed again. "Nothing. Will you cook the fish? I'm gonna go wash off these clothes."

"Uh, yeah, sure. Snag some more firewood while you're gone, will ya? I want to try something." He busied himself with finding clean cooking supplies. "There's a river only five or so minutes that way-" he pointed vaguely to the left. "Not even...uh, that is, y'can't miss it."

"Kay. I won't be gone long." Akane wandered off into the forest, thinking.

I'll bet he was about to say that even Ryouga could've found it. We've both been avoiding talking about anybody back home. Not much of a surprise, I guess...they're what we always used to fight about.

Ryoga, Shampoo, Ukyou, P-chan...it was always something. This is kinda nice, but how long is it going to last? Sooner or later, one of them's going to catch up with us. \_

\_ Besides, I'm not staying away forever. I do miss my family.\_

Then she remembered the way Nabiki was always taking advantage of every situation, her father's tendency to break into tears for the stupidest reasons, Kasumi's obliviousness...her mother's absense...

\_Well, maybe not too much. I love them, but...I needed a break. \_

\_ Maybe they do, too, sometimes. Maybe they've got their own ways of getting away.\_

She looked up. It was a beautiful night. Dark, very dark, but beautiful... the trees were so tall that not much moonlight managed to seep through the branches, and what little moonlight there was caused more shadows than light. She'd gotten used to finding her way through dark forests, though. And she could hear water ahead of her.

She almost tripped over it in the dark; it was more a stream than a river, really. The one thing Akane really missed about Nerima was being able to take a bath. She kept hoping to find a lake, or even just a larger stretch of river; something large enough to bathe in. \_But not deep enough to drown in!\_ she thought quickly, remembering her terror of deep water. It would be nice to be clean- or rather, as clean as one could get without using soap or shampoo. But so far, no such luck...Akane sighed. She'd snagged a spare set of clothes on her way out of the camp, and pulled them on. On a whim she dunked as much of her head into the stream as she could, washing off the sweat that had accumulated while she was cooking. She pulled her head out of the water and stared at it thoughtfully; a small fish darted by as she watched.

\_The nights are getting colder. Pretty soon, we'll \_have\_ to go back. Maybe Ranma's survived living outside in the winter, but I don't want to try it.\_

She shook her head in an attempt to dry her hair. \_Hmm. My hair's getting longer...it's been a while since I thought of cutting it, even before I started on this trip. It was short enough so that even a month of growing makes a noticeable difference, I guess. \_

\_ Maybe I'll grow it out. I sometimes miss having long hair. 'Sides, I'm sure not gonna ask Ranma to try cutting it, and I can't do it myself. \_

\_ What am I doing?\_

Akane pursed her lips. \_Friends. We're friends. Sure, when we get back, everyone will either try to marry us off right away or make sure we never see each other again, but we're friends. Not fiancées, not anything, just friends. That's all I wanted, right? After all, I hate boys. I'm never getting married, or at least not for a good long while. I just wanted to be friends with him. \_

\_ Right? \_

\_ Damn, I really don't know anymore. He's trying so hard to be nice...really, he is being pretty nice. He could've just picked me up and dragged me back home. He even apologizes lately when he says something stupid. So do I. I guess things are going okay. \_

\_ Why am I not sure, all at once?\_

Akane tossed her head one more time. \_Hmph. Wonder why he wants the extra firewood? We usually don't need a fire burning all night, and it'd be silly to have me train by breaking it into logs or something. He already knows I can do that. \_

\_ Guess I'll find out.\_

\*\*\*\*\*

Ranma sat in front of the fire, contemplating and lightly tossing an acorn up into the air and catching it with his right hand, munching on a piece of fish in his left. He didn't have a clue what sort of fish it was, but it tasted pretty good. \_Geez, you'd think that after spending ten years living in the wild, I'd know the names of more plants and animals and things than I do. Pop was never too good at that, though. And I wasn't too interested either. But it'd be handy to know what a thing was, instead of just being able to guess if it was poisonous or not.\_

\_What's takin' Akane so long? She's gotta be starving; she spent hours trying to make dinner.\_ He shuddered. \_I can't believe that her cooking hasn't improved \_at all!\_ She should stick to sparring and getting firewood and other stuff. How's she supposed to improve her skills if she comes down with a stomachache every night?\_

\_Well, maybe tonight's lesson will help. Or maybe it'll just get my head bashed in if she can't figure out how to do it...\_

"Hey, Ranma, here's that extra firewood. What's it for?"

Ranma took a deep breath. \_Well, here goes nothin'.\_ "Bring it over here, Akane. We're gonna try something."

With a quizzical look on her face, Akane dropped the firewood next to Ranma and sat down.

Ranma threw another branch on the fire, which flared up and burned more brightly than before. Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out several small rocks, and tossed them on top of the fire. "Okay, Akane. You've seen me do this before, but pay attention anyway."

He focused his attention, and his hands moved like lightning. Within two seconds he had pulled all the rocks off of the fire. His hands weren't burned at all.

He grinned and tossed one of the pebbles into the air lightly. "Tenshen Amigurikan. We haven't got any chestnuts out here, so these will have to do."

Akane's eyes boggled. "You want \_me\_ to try \_that???\_"



"Akane, you're already pretty strong. What you really need to work on is speed. I've been helping you develop that since we started this trip. You're still not as fast as you need to be, though- nowhere near as fast as you could be- and trying this will help. I doubt you'll be able to master it for a while, but just practicing it should help you get faster. After that, everything'll get a lot easier." She still looked doubtful. He threw the small rocks back on the fire. "Just give it a shot."

Akane eyed the fire warily and took a deep breath. "Okay." She raised her hands; her eyes narrowed in concentration. "Tenshen Amigurikan... YOWTCH!!!" She blew at her hands furiously; they were slightly burned. "Damn."

Ranma handed her a bucket of water, smiling. "I said it wouldn't be easy."

She thrust her hands into the water, which steamed slightly. "Ow. How long did it take you to master this?"

"A couple'a days, I think. Though I only got it when I tried with the fish, remember?"

"Yeah. Okay. Again." Her hands reached towards the fire, and came back almost immediately. "Ow!!!" She dunked them into the bucket for a few seconds. "Again."

"Ow!" \*splash\* "Again."

"Ow!" \*splash\* "Again!"

"OW!" \*splash\*

"Akane, that's enough. You'll really get hurt if you keep this up."

Akane blew on her hands, which were very red. She glared at him. "You're getting even for all the times I malletted you, aren't you."

Ranma forced himself not to grin. "Hey, if you don't want to learn the technique, we can go back to practicing other stuff..."

"I'll get it."

"I know you will."

Akane looked up and stared at him, a perplexed expression on her face. After a moment, she started blushing. Ranma felt his cheeks get hot and realized he was probably blushing, too. "So, uh, yeah, I guess that's it for tonight, right? We'll get back to work in the morning. See ya then, 'kay?" He all but ran for his tent, stumbling into his sleeping bag.

Geez, why'd I do that? That was dumb; she's probably pissed 'cause I left all the cleaning up to her...but damn, she's cute when she blushes. Wonder what she was thinking?

Ranma heard the clanging of pots and pans being stacked together, and smiled to himself. Yep. She's at least a little pissed, or else she

wouldn't be makin' so much noise. \_

\_ She's doing pretty well...learning even faster than I usually do. I wouldn't be surprised if she picks up the Chestnut Fist in a few days. Just like me. Cologne said it took most warriors a year to master, and that I must either be stubborn or brilliant to get it so quick.\_ He grinned. \_With Akane, it's probably both. She's a good student, now that she doesn't lose her temper all the time. I didn't think I'd have this much fun. Why weren't things ever like this between us before? \_

\_ Oh yeah; 'cause someone was always interrupting, or she was hitting me, or my foot was in my mouth.\_ Another loud \*clang!\* caught his attention, and he grinned. \_Okay, so I still sometimes put my foot in my mouth, but anyway, life is good. \_

\_ I'll have her try that technique with fish tomorrow, instead of hot small rocks; maybe that'll be easier for her...\_

Before long, Ranma had drifted into sleep.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Hey Ranma, let's stop here, okay? I'm hungry, and this is a nice place."

Ranma smiled to himself They'd been traveling for another two days, with Akane stopping at every possible opportunity to try- again- to master her new technique. So far, she still wasn't making any progress. It was much earlier in the day than when they usually broke camp, and he wasn't fooled at all by her reasons for wanting to stop now. On the other hand, he knew that in her position, he'd do the same thing.

\_Good thing nobody's been following us, near as I can tell. It'd be easy to keep track of all the campfires we've been leaving behind!\_ "Sure thing, Akane," he responded, dropping his backpack onto the ground. "You go snag wood for a fire while I set up camp, okay?"

"Okay." Akane eagerly dropped her own backpack to the ground and skipped off into the woods. Ranma busied himself with setting up their two tents, clearing a place between them and setting up a circle of rocks in which to build a fire, and finding the ingredients for their dinner that night. Before too long, Akane returned carrying a bunch of dead, broken branches. She placed them inside the ring of rocks that Ranma had made, and sat down in front of them. She picked out two of the smaller branches and started rubbing them together, as fast as she could manage. That was an idea she'd had the day before: that if she rubbed two sticks together quickly enough, the friction would make them catch on fire. That way, they could save matches, and she'd get more practice at moving her hands quickly. Ranma was proud of her for thinking of that- he never would've- even though it hadn't worked yet.

"Hey!" Akane cried out suddenly. Ranma turned to see that this time, a small fire \_had\_ started on one of the branches, which Akane quickly thrust into the rest of the pile of wood. Before long, a cozy fire was burning.

"Not bad, Akane!" Ranma applauded her. "Your speed must be improving."

Akane smiled brightly. "Maybe this time..."

"Give it a shot. I'll fix us some grub."

Ranma couldn't help but smile wryly to himself as his cooking was interrupted sporadically by sharp yelps of pain. \_She never knows when to quit...\_ He grinned. \_Kinda like me. Heh.\_ "C'mon, Akane, that's enough for now. You don't want to injure your hands, right? And didn't you say you were hungry?"

He looked back to see Akane staring at her reddened hands glumly. "I'm never going to get this, Ranma."

"Sure you will. You're just getting started."

"Whatever. That river should still be nearby; I want to dunk my hands for a few minutes. They hurt."

He tossed a bucket at her. "Bring some water back with you; my canteen's nearly empty."

She caught it automatically, then winced, glaring at her reddened hands. Biting her lip in frustration, she walked off. Ranma watched after her, remembering how often he'd burned his hands when he was trying to learn the Chestnut Fist technique and feeling almost sympathetic.

\_But hey, what fun is martial arts without a little challenge, right?\_

Whistling, he unwrapped two fish that they'd caught earlier in the day. After inserting two sharpened sticks carefully through them, he held them over the fire. Before long the smell of cooked food was making his mouth water. \_Walking all day is hungry work!\_ He grinned to himself and began eating one of the fish. \_Not bad. Definitely not Kasumi's cooking, but it'll keep us going. \_

\_ She's been gone a while,\_ he realized suddenly. \_I thought she said she'd only be a few minutes.\_

Ranma waited a while, but Akane didn't return. He began to get worried, and considered his options. \_I can go look for her, or I can stay. It'd probably be better to stay; I can't leave the fire unattended, and building it up again is always a hassle. Besides, it's probably nothing. \_

\_ Still...\_

Muttering under his breath about stupid tomboys getting themselves in trouble, Ranma kicked the fire into oblivion and wandered in the direction Akane had gone. He found the river within minutes; they'd been following it closely, so that they'd always have a source of water handy. But Akane was nowhere in sight. He looked around carefully for signs that she'd been there, and didn't see any offhand. Scowling, he walked along the edge to see if she was nearby.

His ears picked up something; the sound of the water was changing gradually. The river was growing a bit wider, its current a bit more rushed.

\_It probably flows into a lake somewhere along here. Oh man, for all I know that idiot's gotten herself drowned!\_

He pushed a branch out of his way with one hand, and reached up to wipe the sweat off of his face with the other, and froze partway through the motion. He stared, not daring to move, at the scene before him.

His guess was accurate; the river emptied into a small body of water in a clearing. The moon was three-quarters full, and there was more than enough light for him to see clearly by.

Akane was floating at the edge the lake, her hair flowing with the water, her face turned towards the sky. Her skin was pale, almost glowing in comparison to the dark water around her. With a sigh, she ducked under for just an instant, making a little splash; then she stood up and walked out of the water.

Ranma could only watch in wonder, his mind reeling...the grace of her movements, her beauty in the moonlight, that sad half-smile on her face...her hair had been growing long again; it covered her neck...she looked almost mysterious, older than the teenager he knew. He watched, fascinated, as drops of water wound their way down her skin, as she leaned over to pick up the clothes she'd left on the bank.

Maybe a branch snapped under his foot, or maybe she heard the sound of his heart pounding. For whatever reason, she chose that moment to look up.

Their eyes met.

Akane froze for a minute, then- slowly- she picked up the shirt she had been reaching for and stood up again, without ever letting her eyes leave his. She looked at him, without moving again, for what seemed like an eternity.

Ranma's mind had taken a vacation. Carefully, he backed up several steps, then turned and walked in the opposite direction. He didn't pay attention to where he was going, and missed the camp entirely. Eventually he sat down in the middle of the woods, leaning back against a tree. Again, he reached up a hand to wipe the sweat off of his forehead.

It was only then that he noticed his hands were shaking.

\*\*\*\*\*

After he'd left, Akane remained standing by the edge of the water, the towel gripped tightly in her hands. \_Why are my hands shaking?\_ she thought, in an odd mix of curiosity and calmness. She was amazed at how detached she felt. She wondered if she should be angry.

Ignoring her trembling hands, she quickly dried off and put her

clothes back on. \_I wonder what he was thinking...\_

\_What am \_I\_ thinking???

She bit her lip, trying desperately to puch the mental images out of her mind, but it didn't work very well. Her entire body was tingling.

Something had changed- finally, absolutely changed. She didn't know how she knew, but she did.

\_Oh lord, what do I do now?\_

\* \* \*

> <p> Yes, I know that Akane can't swim, is terrified of deep water, sinks like a brick with an elephant attached, etc...this water is not that deep. In fact, if she stood up, it would probably not even be past her knees. (of course it gets deeper the further into the lake you go, but she wouldn't do that) She was desperate for a bath, and I was desperate for a good clear moment of romantic tension. So there!  
\*Gryn\* <p>

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### 3. Chapter Three

It'd been three days. Three days of them both refusing to talk about what had happened. As if it hadn't happened at all. Akane wondered if maybe she'd imagined the entire thing. She tried to act casual, as though it hadn't been anything important enough to mention. But she thought about it all the time, and would blush at random moments.

\_It. Like it's something too embarassing to even think about. Geez, all he did was walk in on me taking a bath, right? Not like it's the first time \_that's\_ happened!\_

But even as she thought the words, she could feel her cheeks heat up.

\_I'm such an idiot. He probably doesn't even notice...\_

Then again, he'd been oddly nervous for the past few days, and every so often she'd catch him staring at her with a very strange expression on his face.

\_Okay, so maybe he does.\_ She scowled. \_Why couldn't things have stayed simple?\_

\*\*\*\*\*

\_Validation\_

>A Ranma 12 Fanfic by Ashfae  
>Chapter Three <p>

\*\*\*\*\*

It didn't really matter if she blushed; the fog bank they'd been slogging through for the past half an hour was so thick that they could barely see each other. Or, more importantly, where they were going.

"Where in the heck did this stuff come from?" Ranma grumbled under his breath. Akane bit her lip, forcing herself not to snap at him. He'd been complaining about the fog ever since it had sprung up, and her temper was wearing thin. Despite all the...things...that had happened between them lately, they hadn't had any real fights since the trip started, and she wanted to keep it that way.

Even if he was being a jerk, and she'd nearly bitten her tongue in half trying not to tell him so.

She distracted herself by looking as best she could at their surroundings. Even with the view misted over by fog, there was something familiar about them...even about the fog itself. The back of her mind itched, trying to remember.

\_...walking in the fog, listening to the odd, low noises the forest made around her...the crunching of sticks beneath her feet made louder by the fear she felt...expecting that any minute, the monster they'd heard rumors about was going to come out and eat her, and she was lost so nobody would ever know what had happened...\_

It came back to her in a rush, and she snapped her fingers.  
"Ryukenzawa!"

"Eh?" Ranma looked at her.

"We're on the edge of Ryukenzawa, Ranma. Don't you remember? There's a ring of fog surrounding the entire forest. Normal animals don't go past it, and the giant ones don't go outside of it. That must be where we are. I can't believe I didn't realize we were heading in this direction, I didn't even think about it..."

"Yeah," Ranma said, a bit sourly. "Me neither."

She looked over at him. "Something wrong?"

"No!" he said quickly--and defensively. He was scowling hard enough to bore holes through walls.

\_Is he...jealous?\_

Akane thought fast. "I'd kind of like to avoid Shinnosuke and his grandfather, if you don't mind. It'd be nice to see them again sometime, but I don't really want to meet up with anyone else we know just yet." She saw Ranma visibly relax, and smiled to herself. \_He is jealous!\_ "But this would be a good place to train, for both of us. All those giant animals keep you on your toes."

"It's kinda dangerous, though, Akane," Ranma pointed out. "This \_really\_ ain't a good place for sleeping outside. We look like bugs to some of the things in here--there's no way to prepare for that."

"True. On the other hand, if we got some of the Water of Life, my cooking would be edible!"

Ranma grinned, the first she'd seen in days. She smiled back; slamming her own cooking was worth it, to have some of the tension between them lessened. Even if it hurt a bit to think of how little progress she'd made.

He thought for a minute before answering her. "How 'bout this. We'll stay outside of the forest for now, and circle around. The giant animals won't cross the fog bank, you think?" Akane nodded. "Then it's easy. We camp on the safe side, and during the day we can train in the forest. Though really, I don't think giant piranas are gonna help you with the Amigurikan technique."

"Hah. Just you wait 'til I learn it, Ranma. I'll \_get\_ you!"

"Suuuuuuuure you will. I'm quaking in my boots here."

"Why you....ooooooooohhh, \_Ran\_-ma!" She pretended to try and hit him with her backpack. She didn't really want to hit him; she was too busy being glad that they were talking normally (for them) again, instead of walking around in silence. She knew he didn't mean it, that he really believed she would learn the Amigurikan technique. He wouldn't try to teach it if he didn't think she could learn. He was just teasing her.

She stopped dead in her tracks. \_Is that it?\_ she wondered, looking at him walking a few steps ahead of her; he hadn't noticed yet that she'd stopped. \_How many times has he been teasing me, and I took it seriously? I always thought he was insulting me, but what if he was just playing? He grew up knowing only his father, and I've seen how they act around each other. It's always fights and insults and a show of strength. Is that it? Why didn't I think of that before?\_ The thought was a shock.

\_Guys haven't ever teased me before. They either fell for me immediately or never noticed I existed, and I don't know which was worse. No one ever took me seriously as a martial artist. Not my sisters, not Dad...not even those stupid jerks that I beat up every day at school. I always thought Ranma meant it, that he really thought I was unsexy and uncute and would never be a real martial artist. \_

\_ But he's here. He followed me all the way out here, he agreed to come with me instead of dragging me back to Nerima. And he's training me. So he must think I'm a martial artist, even though I'm not as good as he is. If he didn't, he wouldn't waste his time to help me improve. And even if I'm unsexy or uncute...he's still here, and he was blushing like hell when he saw me bathing in the lake, so he must've seen \_something\_ he liked! \_

\_ Maybe I was wrong. Not about all the insults, but at least about some of them.\_ The thought brought a smile to her face. \_Maybe he likes me a little bit after all.\_

Ranma noticed that she was no longer walking, and turned to see her still standing there. "Yo, Akane, what's up?"

She bit her lip, her sudden euphoria replaced by guilt. \_It hurt whenever he insulted me, but I always went so far...I can't count how

many times I've bashed him. He was right in calling me violent, that's for sure. I didn't want to believe it...I never was violent before he showed up and all that chaos followed him. Well, except towards those guys before school...but still, maybe I've changed more than I thought.\_ The thought was sobering.

\_I think I owe him an apology.\_

She looked down, cluching her hands together in front of her. "Um, Ranma, I, um..." He waited expectantly, curious. She took a deep breath. "I'm--"

A loud crashing sound reverberated through the forest; Akane nearly jumped out of her skin, taken completely by surprise. Ranma looked immediately towards the direction of the sound, his brow furrowed. "C'mon, we should see what that was."

He started running. Akane could only follow, muttering under her breath, "Wouldn't it make more sense to run \_away\_ from the weird booming noises?"

Ranma looked over his shoulder and grinned at her. "You're the one who wanted to train here!"

She would have glared at him, but just then a shadow fell over both of them, and she looked up to find...

\_...what in the hell IS that thing?!!\_

Even Ranma stopped to stare. Coming towards them was a giant lizard, fairly ordinary except for the fact that it was the size of a bus. Running in front of it was a man-shaped figure covered in dark, spiky things. It was making a strange, high-pitched "Whoop! Whoop! Whoop!" noise, and waving its arms frantically. The figure and the lizard both ran right by Ranma and Akane, who could only watch in stunned amazement.

Akane blinked. "Did you see that?"

Ranma was staring after them. "Uh...yeah, I think so."

"What was that thing? The spiny one?"

"I dunno. I've never seen anything like that before."

\*\*\*crashcrashcrashCRASHSLAMYEOWWTCHH(weirdanimealcry)BOOM!\*\*\*

Akane looked at Ranma and shrugged. He inclined his head towards the crash, and they both started running in that direction. The lizard had left a trail of bent trees and broken branches behind; it was easy to follow. The trail ended a few hundred feet later in a huge clearing. Akane stopped at the edge of the trees, Ranma just behind her. He muttered "What the..." under his breath. She just blinked.

In the middle of the clearing was a pile of rocks with two black, spiky arms waving furiously above it. The giant lizard nosed at the pile of rocks for a few minutes, then wandered off, obviously bored now that the game of chase-the-weird-spiky-thing had ended. Akane



could hear muffled shouting. "Melp! Melp! Met meef moutta mferemph!" She resisted the urge to giggle and went forward to start undigging the creature, who she now was pretty sure was human.

With Ranma's help, the rockpile rapidly diminished. A head emerged, along with shoulders and the top part of a torso. Akane stared. The person they were helping was covered in a black, sticky substance. There were grasses and weeds stuck to him everywhere, as well as...

\_...feathers?!?\_

"Eh now, that wasn't supposed to happen at all. How strange, how strange. Thank y'kindly, young feller," the man said as Ranma helped pull him out of the trap. "I'm much obliged. I am Professor Shintai from the University. Oh dear, I believe I've ruined this suit, what do you think?"

Akane looked dubiously at the older man. He was trying to scrape the black substance--\_what is that stuff, tar?\_--off of his clothes, but was not having much luck: the stuff was so sticky that his hands kept getting glued to his sides. "What are you doing out here, um, Professor?"

"Shintai, Shintai, please. Research. Yes, I have definitely ruined this suit."

"Research?" Ranma said the word as though it tasted bad in his mouth. Akane almost giggled. \_Considering how much he hates homework, it probably does!\_

Shintai nodded. "Yes indeed, research of a most important nature."

Ranma looked suspicious. "What kinda research?"

Shintai crossed his arms over his chest (where they promptly stuck) and looked very serious. Or at least, as serious as an old man tarred and covered with grass and feathers could look. "Why does the Water of Life cause animals to grow large? Why doesn't it also affect humans? Where did these animals come from? Do the rumours of an eight-headed-dragon living in this area have any basis in reality? Why does a fog bank surround the entire forest? What is the best way to distract a giant chipmunk?" He assumed a noble expression. "It is my solemn duty to answer all these questions, and indeed, to solve all the mysteries of this forest!"

Akane had nearly bitten through her lip trying to keep from laughing. Between Shintai's tirade and Ranma's dumbfounded expression, it was difficult to keep a straight face.

"How'd you end up lookin' like that?" Ranma wondered.

"I was exploring the tar pits when the lizard startled me. Very foolish. I'd wandered off, you see. I backed away and fell into one of the tar pits. I managed to pull myself out, but was temporarily blinded. I was trying to find my way back home but kept hitting trees and things. That's certainly where the leaves came from. I fell down a lot, hence the grass. And then I must have tripped over a herd of wild midget chickens, which would explain the feathers." He looked

Akane looked back at their erstwhile hostess. Unlike most housewives, Miyo opted for trousers and a loose shirt rather than a dress. Her body was lean and muscled, and Akane could tell just from watching her walk that the older woman had studied martial arts at one point in time or another.

\_But then,\_ thought Akane wryly, \_just about everyone I've met since Ranma has.\_

"Ummm, we're not in your way or anything, are we?" Ranma asked nervously, eyeing their hosts with a wary eye. Akane sighed. She'd also wondered if they were imposing by following Professor Shintai home...but she was hoping to offer something in exchange for use of the kitchen and the bathroom, at least. It'd been \_ages\_ since she'd eaten rice, or really gotten her clothes cleaned, or had a bath...

That thought led immediately to the memory of what had happened when she'd tried bathing in the lake, and Akane blushed. Again.

\_I really wish that hadn't happened. Or at least that I'd stop \_thinking\_ about it!\_

"For goodness' sake, Shintai, go take a bath. You're not allowed at the dinner table until you're clean."

"With guests here?" Shintai protested. "I wouldn't dream of it. Besides, I haven't had a chance to ask them yet why--"

"I," Miyo interrupted firmly, "will see to our guests. You will go take a bath. Now."

"Yes, dear," Shintai sighed, meekly slipping off of the stool he'd been sitting on--which was now almost as tar-encrusted as he was--and leaving the room.

Miyo smiled after him, shaking her head. "Now, let's see..." She turned her smile on the two nervous teenagers. "Ranma and Akane, yes? I do apologize for my husband; he can be rather thoughtless, and has no sense of manners. If I hadn't sent him off he'd be asking for your entire life stories."

"We don't mind, Miyo-san, truly," Akane said. "And we're very sorry for imposing."

"Not at all. Would you like some dinner?" She gestured at a pot above the fireplace. "We have plenty. Please feel free." Without waiting for an answer, she snagged two bowls and filled them with vegetable stew, handing them to her guests. Akane accepted gratefully, feeling her stomach rumble at the idea of eating something other than fish.

"Man, this is fantastic." Ranma had already bolted his food down and was holding out his bowl for seconds. "You sure can cook!"

"Ranma!" Akane chided. "We're guests here. Don't be such a pig."

Ranma grumbled, muttering something like, "Ryouga's the pig, not me."

But Miyo just waved a hand, dismissing Akane's protest. "Don't worry, don't worry. It's a pleasure to have visitors; we don't see many people out here."

"I guess the man-eating lizards scare would most people off," Ranma said.

The woman smiled again; she smiled almost as much as Kasumi. She also kept her hands busy as she talked, scrubbing the tar-encrusted coat with an efficiency that would have impressed even the eldest Tendou daughter. "You get used to the giant animals after a while." She must have seen doubt in their faces, because she laughed. "Well, not really, but it does keep life interesting, even if Shintai is always chasing or being chased by them."

"He seems nice," Akane said, meaning it.

"Oh, yes. And very, very intelligent; don't let his absent-mindedness fool you. He's always been like that, for as long as I've known him."

"How did you meet him?"

Miyo smiled wryly. "After nearly getting killed on several of his expeditions, he decided that it would be prudent to hire a bodyguard. I applied. Eventually we became attached to each other and decided to marry."

"You're a bodyguard?" Ranma looked surprised.

"My father was an important businessman many years ago. Attempts on his life were made regularly, so when my brother and I were born, he decided to have us both trained in the martial arts, for our own protection." She shrugged. "I enjoyed it, so I eventually made it my career. Father wasn't happy, but there wasn't much he could do to stop me."

"How good are you?" Ranma asked. Akane could hear eagerness in his voice, the anticipation of a possible challenge, and felt her heart sink. \_He must be getting bored, working just with me...\_

Miyo eyed him seriously. "Not nearly as skilled as I would guess you are, young man. And I'm willing to bet that your fiancée can give you a better fight than I could, when she sets her mind to it."

"Yeah, she's pretty good," Ranma said offhandedly, as though Akane weren't sitting right next to him. Akane felt her cheeks heat up again, and stared at him in open astonishment. He blinked at her. "What?"

\_I don't think he's ever\_ complimented my martial arts skills before. Definitely not to somebody else.\_

"Um, anyway, we should probably be going," Akane said quickly, trying to cover her embarrassment.

"Why?" Miyo asked bluntly. "Where are you headed?"

"Well, nowhere really, we're just on a training trip..." Akane's voice trailed off as she realized there was no way of explaining the full series of events that had brought her and Ranma here.

"Would you like to stay with us for a while?" Miyo offered. "We truly would like the company, and there's no need for you to sleep in the

forest if it's not necessary. You can't train every hour of the day, after all."

\_Well, maybe Ranma could.\_ Akane smiled ruefully. \_But I'd rather not.\_ She had to admit, the idea was appealing. Miyo and Shintai's house was neatly built beside a rocky area in the middle of the forest, near the lake where the Orochi slept. Most of the giant animals tended to avoid the area, preferring to live in the trees. It would be \_much\_ safer than sleeping out in the open, but there would still be a lot of action. Thanks to the stream, there was plenty of water. There was no electricity, so the facilities were still fairly primitive, but the living conditions would certainly be easier than camping.

\_And it would be nice to have some other company...\_ Akane thought wistfully. \_Someone who isn't going to want to kill or marry us!\_

Miyo watched emotions play across the girl's face with an understanding smile. "I'll leave you two to discuss it," she said, turning to leave. "Besides, I should check on Shintai. By this point he might have drowned himself, for all I know."

Ranma chuckled, but as soon as the woman was gone he looked quizzically at Akane. "Do you wanna stay?"

"Yeah...I kinda do," she admitted. "Would you mind?"

He shrugged. "Makes no difference to me."

"Then let's stay," Akane decided. "For a while, anyway."

"Speakin' of which...Akane, when were you plannin' to go back, anyhow?" Ranma's voice was serious. "We've already been gone a couple a' weeks, and nobody there knows where we are."

"You don't have to stay," she fired immediately, annoyed. \_He's not missing Ukyou or Shampoo or something, is he?\_ "If you miss Nerima, you can leave tomorrow for all I care."

"Geez, Akane, you know that's not what I meant. I said I'd stick around, didn't I? But your family's gonna be worried sick."

"Sorry." Akane's shoulders sank. "I don't know, Ranma. I really don't. I don't want them to worry, but you \_know\_ what'd happen if anyone even got a hint of where we are..."

To her relief, he shuddered. "No kiddin'. They'd runnin' all over each other to get here."

"Exactly." Something occurred to her. "You said my family...won't your dad be concerned about you?"

Ranma just snorted. "Hell, he's probably proud. They wanted me to chase after you, remember?"

She groaned. "Yeah, that's true. They'll probably have a wedding planned within a week of us getting back if we're not careful."

"They'd \_better\_ not."

That stung a bit, but Akane knew it wasn't personal. She didn't want to get married either. Definitely not right now. "We can deal with that later. For now, I refuse to think about it." She grinned at him. "After all, I can't go back until I've learned the Tenshen Amiguriken."

He grinned back. "Or how to cook."

"You don't know how to cook?" Miyo walked back into the room just then, catching the tail-end of their conversation.

"Nope. Her cooking stinks. She could bring down an elephant with that stuff."

Akane bit her lip and forced herself not to be annoyed. \_He's not trying to be mean. He's not trying to be mean. I know he isn't. He's just not thinking. I'm \_not\_ gonna bash him. Not until next time we spar, anyway.\_

"Really?" Miyo looked curious. "Would you like me to teach you? I haven't got much to work with out here, but I'm sure we could manage."

Akane's eyes nearly popped out of her head. \_Who \_is\_ this woman? She feeds us dinner, invites us to stay, and now wants to teach me to cook? She must be some kind of goddess!\_ "You wouldn't mind?" she asked timidly. "I'm really not very good--"

"That's an understatement."

"Ranma, hush," Miyo said firmly. "I wouldn't mind at all, Akane. It'll be fun."

"Then...yes, please!" Akane answered, beaming. "Ranma's not such a great cook either, so it'd be nice to have someone around who knows what they're doing."

"Hey!" Ranma protested. Akane just stuck her tongue out at him.

Miyo smiled. "Then it's settled. We can begin tomorrow morning."

\* \* \*

> <p> The "Whoop! Whoop! Whoop!" is an obscure reference to a comic strip called "Where the Buffalo Roam," which probably no one outside of Boulder, CO has read. The rest of you can wonder. =) <p>

This seems like the best place to apologize. Yes, it's well over a year since I worked on this. I truly don't know if I'll complete it or not. I do promise that if I haven't put out another chapter in the next few weeks, I'll just post every snippet I ever wrote (including the ending, which is complete) up on my webpage. And yes, I know that I'm very evil. I'm sorry. I just lost track of Ranma fanfiction in favor of new and interesting other things, and I've never quite gone back. I do still like this story, though, and I \_hope\_ I'll finish it.

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End  
file.